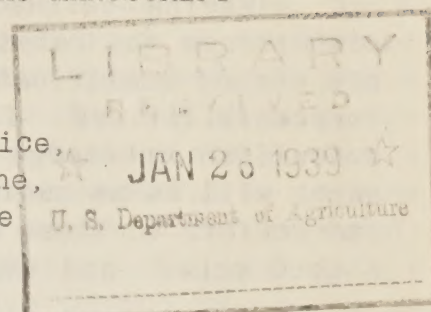


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THE EDITOR'S RELATION TO THE PUBLICATION OF A BUREAU MANUSCRIPT*

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Progress in handling manuscripts in the Editorial Office depends very largely on general agreement throughout the divisions of the Bureau regarding the relation of the editor to their publication, and action that will make such general agreement effective. Surely we all desire that the results of Bureau work be published as promptly as possible and surely, also, that they be issued in the best possible form. To accomplish this, a common attitude and a common procedure throughout the Bureau are of the greatest importance.

Before discussing any subject, a speaker should define his terms if there is any chance that his hearers may have other and divergent definitions in their minds; otherwise his argument may lead to no definite conclusion. What, then, do I mean by "the editor"? I mean an editor in the Editorial Office of this Bureau, and therefore one who has a sufficiently good general education, not only in English and its branches but in the sciences, to enable him to review a Bureau manuscript intelligently and assist the author in conveying his message in the best way to the reader for whom it is intended.

And what do I mean by a "Bureau manuscript"? I mean a manuscript of which a Bureau worker is the author, based on his investigations as a Bureau worker or the subject matter of which pertains to this Bureau.

The place of intended publication does not determine whether or not a manuscript is a Bureau manuscript. If all the papers and reports based on Bureau work were published at the Government Printing Office, a Bureau manuscript might be defined as one based on Bureau research or relating to Bureau work or subject matter and intended for publication by the Government. As is well known, only about one-third of our manuscripts are, or can be, so published. Printing funds have always been inadequate. Furthermore, the numbered series and the periodicals of the Department are so defined and restricted that for many manuscripts giving the results of official work there would be no place for official publication even if funds were adequate. The only real distinction, then, so far as the editor is concerned, is between a manuscript which must be prepared for publication in accordance with the Manual of Style of the Government Printing Office and the established usage of the Department of Agriculture and one that need not be so prepared.

*A paper read at the Division Leaders' Conference in the office of the Chief of Bureau November 27, 1938.

Having defined a Bureau editor and a Bureau manuscript, we can now discuss the relation of the one to the publication of the other. With his stated qualifications, what, then, are the Bureau editor's duties and responsibilities? I would say that they are so to use the general and scientific knowledge his education and training have given him that the paper will be as useful as possible to the readers for whom it is intended, and conform to those standards which are generally accepted requirements of a good paper, and thus be a credit to the Department, Bureau, and author.

What do others, outside the Bureau, consider to be the editor's function? According to the United States Geological Survey, editorial work includes examination of character and gradation of headings, form of tables and sections, various features of typographic style such as sizes and styles of type (this last would apply mainly to manuscripts to be printed as public documents), capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, as well as many other details. It includes also suggestions to the author concerning arrangement of matter, paragraphing, correction of faults or errors in grammar or rhetoric, clarification of obscure passages, elimination of repetitious or irrelevant matter, and many other features. According to one who once had charge of the course in editing in the Department Graduate School, the editor rearranges material where necessary or desirable, tightens loose and sloppy writing, checks opportunities for misunderstanding, substitutes correct statements for those that are incorrect.

But the Bureau editor should be required to apply his knowledge and skill to the editing of a Bureau manuscript only after the author has done his level best to convey his message, to the reader for whom it is intended, systematically, in an orderly and progressive manner, logically, clearly, and concisely, and after the author has been given such help in his division as will achieve that end. The Bureau editor should not be expected to do anything to a manuscript that the author, with such help as he needs from others in his division, can himself do to make it acceptable for publication. There are two reasons for this. One is that the final paper will then be more truly his own and therefore more satisfactory to the author and division. But the second and compelling reason is that the number of manuscripts to be handled in the Editorial Office is so great (for several years over 500 annually), and the number of editors so small in proportion, that these editors haven't time to be ghost writers, even if they wished to, nor have they time to make the numerous editorial changes and revisions that painstaking work by the author would have rendered unnecessary. Such work delays attention to manuscripts which have been well prepared and should be promptly issued. Nothing pleases our editors more than to receive a manuscript that is well written and needs little editing, and can therefore be sent on for approval shortly after its receipt.

I have referred to the editor's job as a review, primarily from the literary standpoint, of a manuscript that has been put in the best possible shape before it is sent to the Chief of Bureau and by him forwarded to the Editorial Office. This involves a discussion of the author's relation to the publication of a Bureau manuscript and the division leader's relation to its publication.

The author should realize, in the first place, that while, in a certain sense, it is his manuscript, it is also a manuscript of the Bureau and of the Department of Agriculture. The Government has assigned him a definite project, pays him for his services, and provides him with equipment and facilities to carry out this project. In the second place he should realize that the main object of the publication of his manuscript is to make the results of his work available to the public for which it is intended, so that the reader, as representing that public, can quickly and easily comprehend them. The reader, not the author, is the person mainly to be considered. If the reader has difficulty in grasping the author's thought, he will either let the paper go unread or put it by for some more convenient season which, in this busy world, may or may not come. Or, if he reads the paper, he may misinterpret, more or less completely, what the author is, or believes he is, telling him.

G. O. Smith, formerly a director of the Geological Survey, has said, "Scientific thought is exact and direct, and scientific writing must therefore be accurate and to the point." This requires that the paper be systematic, orderly, and logical in its method of presentation. Is it so? That is for the editor to determine. Did the author have, in his own mind at least, a definite outline for the arrangement and presentation of his material? Did he write out headings for his topics, in their proper order, even though such headings are not to be included in the paper as printed? Many periodicals require printed headings. If his paper is systematic, orderly, and logical, the reader will not be asking himself, every few lines, "Why?", "What for?", "Well, what of it?" It will contain the answers to these questions, and in their proper place. And of course it will contain the answers to the queries "Who?", "Where?", "When?", "How?", "What?", and "Whither?", either briefly or in detail, as the reader may require.

The three c's of good scientific writing are correctness, clearness, and conciseness. Correctness implies the use of the correct words to convey the meaning. It implies the use of correct English, not merely from the grammatical standpoint but from that of good usage.

Clearness in the written word reflects clear thinking. If there is not this clearness, the reader may suspect that the author's thinking is not clear and that his conclusions are indefinite. It is necessary to use not only language that can be understood but language that cannot be misunderstood. Such clearness is effected by choosing the right, or best, words, using the correct, or best, sentence structure, and the correct, or best, arrangement of sentences in the paragraph. Thomas Henry Huxley's idea of literary style in scientific writing was "to say that which has to be said in such language that you can stand cross examination on each word." An author knows his subject so well that he unconsciously assumes that the reader knows more about it than he actually does. Here is where the editor, just because of his lack of intimate knowledge of the subject, can be of help.

Conciseness is important because descriptions and statements are more forceful if brief, although, of course, not at the expense of clarity. Brevity in a paper saves the time and patience of the reader and helps to hold his attention.

If, in writing his manuscript, the author finds difficulty in expressing himself clearly and effectively, it is to his interest that he use such help as is available. If he desires to improve as a writer, there are a number of excellent books on general and technical writing that he can study with profit. And then he can get further help from qualified associates in his division. I recently lost, by death, an aunt for whom I had a high regard and of whom I was very fond. Unfortunately with the advancing years her eyesight became extremely poor, so poor that it was necessary for others to read my letters to her. Yet she always insisted on writing her letters with her own pen, despite her failing eyesight and unsteady hand. What was the result? Many of her thoughts and messages never reached me, and others only after much puzzling study and not a little guessing. When receiving a letter from her in the morning as I was leaving for the office, I would look it over on the street car, catch a few words or phrases, a thought or two, and then wait for some time later when I could study and puzzle over it at my leisure and get the messages which I knew would be highly valued, were they not concealed in the undecipherable pen scrawls. Well, she did the best she could, unassisted. But if she had only let someone else handle the pen for her, how much of her thought that was lost would have reached me, and how much more responsive to her messages she would have thought me! Some authors may be like my aunt. They do the best they can, unassisted, possibly not realizing their need of assistance. And the first one to help an author is the division or project leader, and after that, when both the author and his helper in the division have done their best, the Bureau editor. Of course, if the author can't get the help he needs in his own division, the Bureau editor will gladly give him assistance; in fact, such assistance from the Editorial Office is then expected as a matter of course, and rightly so.

It must be feared, however, that there are authors who write poorly because they don't take the trouble to write well. To many authors, writing reports of their work is a laborious and unwelcome task, a task they would like to shift to another's shoulders if allowable, or possible. Nevertheless, it is the author's job if he is able to do it. The author who submits a poorly written paper, or who fails to realize the vast amount of work that devolves upon the Editorial Office, seems in effect to say to the editor, "Here are my notes and data. Now put them in the shape necessary, or that you think necessary, for publication."

When the editor receives full cooperation from the division concerned, his task is greatly lightened, simplified, and shortened. This cooperation and its attendant benefits necessitate that the author be able to take, and profit by, helpfully intended criticism and suggestions, whether from technical reviewer or editor. Until the author has carefully

considered all criticisms and suggestions, has revised his manuscript with these in mind, and has acted on or replied to each comment, his responsibility has not been fully discharged, and the editor may be unable to discharge it for him or to state to the Chief of Bureau that, in his opinion, the paper is in suitable form for publication and is recommended for approval.

It is a matter of regret that authors are so widely scattered as to make personal conferences between author and editor infrequent or impossible. Such conferences are nearly always satisfactory, and author and editor have come from them with increased appreciation of each other's tasks and problems. Often more is thus accomplished in a few hours, or even less, than could be through extended correspondence.

Having discussed the editor's relation to the Bureau manuscript as this relationship involves the author, I will now say a few words about his relation to the manuscript as this relationship involves the technical reviewer. Whenever a manuscript has been forwarded to a reviewer and has been returned with his comments, these are examined by the editor in charge, who then decides, with administrative help or approval if called for, what comments should go to the author with the manuscript. Perhaps, as is sometimes the case, one reviewer has made suggestions for changes that are the opposite, or at least different from, those made by another. Should both suggestions be referred to the division, and, if not, which ones should be? Perhaps one reviewer praises a paper as well prepared while another opines that it is not. (This actually has happened a number of times.) Or perhaps the comment of a reviewer isn't clear to the editor, who thinks it may also not be clear to the author. In this case a conference between editor and reviewer is the procedure followed whenever possible. Perhaps the reviewer has made an editorial suggestion that the editor thinks not a good one or not the best. Or possibly (and happily this is rarely the case) the reviewer's comments may be unduly harsh and the editor feels that if passed on to the author, at least without verbal modification, they might provoke resentment and be not properly effective. What does he do? He uses his best judgment to decide in what form these should go to the author or whether they should go at all. This decision, of course, is made by the editor in charge, or, in case of doubt, by the administrative head of the Bureau, to whom the editor has referred the matter. Usually, however, the reviewers' comments can be sent in their entirety, in the form of a carbon copy of these comments or of the division leader's memorandum containing or quoting them.

When the manuscript comes back from the division the editor has further responsibilities. In the light of the reviewer's comments he then asks himself, Has each comment and suggestion been met? If not, has the author given a satisfactory reason for not meeting or adopting it? If each comment is given a number, and is thus designated in the author's reply, the editor can quickly decide this, and whether the manuscript, with counter comments from the division, should go back to the reviewer. If such disagreements between author and reviewer or editor cannot be composed or reconciled, the matter is of course referred to the Chief of Bureau for decision.

Finally, what is the editor's relation to the manuscript as this relationship involves the division leader? Reference to an administrative communication entitled "Memorandum re Editorial Office and the Handling of Manuscripts", dated April 30, 1934, and still in force, should indicate the answer. Paragraph 3 of that memorandum reads as follows:

"Before submitting manuscripts for approval" (nearly all of what follows here is underlined in the memorandum) "division leaders will carefully review them for subject-matter, arrangement, style, general method of presentation and suitability for publication in the medium proposed. Manuscripts submitted to the Chief of Bureau for consideration should have the approval of the division leader and the transmitting memorandum should include a statement to this effect and also indicate that the points above-mentioned have been considered."

The next and final sentence in the paragraph states that division leaders can suggest special reviewers if they desire.

From the foregoing it will be inferred that one responsibility of the editor is to see whether the provisions of this paragraph have been complied with, and if it should appear to him that they have not, to advise the Chief of Bureau to this effect so that the manuscript can be returned to the division for further attention and revision. If he did not do this, he would be taking upon himself work that should have been done in the division and thus delaying work that properly is his.

The views stated in this paper are not mine only but those of my editorial associates, to whom I have gone for help and suggestions, and who have given me valuable and deeply appreciated assistance.

I have used only part of the time allotted to the Editorial Office so that what remains can be used for discussion. It is my belief that such discussion will be generally helpful and illuminating, and my hope is that it will now be forthcoming.